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Bait/Rebait: It Is Dishonest of English Teachers to Ignore the Homosexuality of Literary Figures Whose Works They Teach

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# Bait

**It is dishonest of English teachers to ignore the homosexuality of literary figures whose works they teach.**

**Pro**

Richard J. Follett

When I was growing up, I sat in church and heard about sins of commission and omission. Preachers usually said that the latter were more insidious, hence more dangerous, since they were secret and could not be dealt with directly. With the nearly absolute silence by English teachers on the gay and lesbian sexuality of numerous writers, I've come to believe those preachers were right. The sins of omission destroy legitimate cultural recognition of alternative modes of living and loving, perpetuating cultural lies and misleading literary interpretations.

The fundamental dishonesty is certain; the ethical question of whether or not this dishonesty should be tolerated is another question. It is important for the ten percent of our students who are developing gay and lesbian identities to know that they are not alone, that, for example, nearly one-third of the authors listed under "Love" in the *Syntopicon* to the *Great Books of the Western World* were homosexually oriented. It is equally important for our non-gay/lesbian students to know this because every 2.6 American families has a gay/lesbian member and each of us has gay/lesbian relatives and/or friends. Facing truth directly is, after all, a big part of what middle and secondary school literature classes should be about.

To give our students long explanations about the love affair of the Brownings and how this was expressed in their poetry and then to fail to men-

tion that Christopher Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd to His Love" was written for his male lover, that Emily Dickinson's life was woman-identified (which explains much of her poetry), that Whitman's "Calamus" poems are directly from his male erotic perspectives, and that Adrienne Rich's finest poetry comes from and deals with her lesbianism is dishonest by omission. If love is capable of providing the impetus for great poetry, that impetus may come from love for a person of one's own gender. It is immoral to withhold clear evidence that this has happened.

The consequences of this dishonesty are numerous. First, failing to let our students know that many authors were homosexually oriented deprives them of contact with influential gays and lesbians and leads, by default, to the myth that these people must be failures. Second, we retard the development of self-reliance in our gay/lesbian students with an omission that, for example, Emerson was homoerotic (as clearly demonstrated in his letter to Symonds and Whitman). Third, we contribute to the emotional suicide of students who have to develop split personalities by covering a portion of their lives. Fourth, we contribute to the suicide of students who find no validation of their own experiences and who feel, often through omission as much as commission, that they cannot fit into this culture.

It is time to stop the deception. It is time to be honest.

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Con

Rayna Larson

It's not that English teachers are dishonest in failing to tell students about the homosexuality of authors. Most of them simply don't know because their teachers never told them. And there really isn't any reason they should have unless the literature they were studying was in some way about homosexuality.

For eons society has operated with a separation between private and public information. People's sexual preferences and behavior have generally been considered private. In the last few decades, we have moved the boundary lines so that some of what used to be considered private is now considered public. But when we try to apply today's standards to yesterday's activities, we open the door to possibilities of biased interpretations which may result in its own kind of dishonesty. For example, it's one thing for Billie Jean King to decide to announce in a news conference that she had a lesbian relationship, but it's quite another thing for people to read Eleanor Roosevelt's correspondence and decide in retrospect that she had a lesbian relationship—whether or not she realized it.

Of course people who identify with a particular group want others to think well of that group and so they are anxious to highlight the achievements of group members. This is why we have such books as *Famous Mormon Pioneers*, *Black Women of Achievement*, and *Athletes with Handicaps*. Promoting group solidarity in this way is perfectly acceptable, but it has little to do with teaching literature. The focus in this kind of thing is on what the achievers have in common, and

when teaching literature the focus rightly belongs on the literature to be read, not on the personal lives of the authors.

A recent controversy in a public library centered around the librarian's decision to pull out all the books written by homosexual authors and put them on a separate shelf. The librarian, himself a homosexual, thought he was serving the cause by informing the public through a lavender-colored sign that some of their favorite authors were homosexual. The case could as well be argued that he was practicing the worst kind of segregation. Some of the authors whose books are on this "lavender shelf" would probably prefer that they be filed in their regular places. What is at the root of the whole movement towards individual rights is that people should be judged on their abilities and work rather than on some external factor such as the color of their skin or their sexual preference.

If librarians and English teachers carefully call attention to the homosexuality of poets and novelists while no one bothers to comment on the homosexuality of truck drivers, explorers, actresses, politicians, athletes, and soldiers, then this will result in a further promotion of the false idea that there is a correlation between being intellectual and being homosexual. A second way that discussing the homosexuality of writers can backfire is that since we don't talk about the sex lives of heterosexual authors, we might unintentionally be communicating the same old message that there is something weird or unusual about people who are homosexual.

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# Rebait

**Pro**

Richard J. Follett

I like the second half of Ms. Larson's concluding statement; unfortunately, the first half just isn't true in most English classes. Literature anthologies give biographical details that include heterosexual orientation as the norm (i.e., marriage and family connections, poetry written during courtships, works written for mistresses of male writers, etc.). Authors who are lesbians or gay males are thus seen, at minimum, as unusual.

Yet there is no need to apologize for being unusual. Indeed, being unusual may be seen by the classroom teacher as a positive trait. Obviously, some homosexual writers in some periods have felt their sexual orientations to be handicaps or character defects, but many developed positive lesbian/gay identities. Just as other minority writers have used their sense of being unusual in their writing, so, too, gay/lesbian writers may use our sensibilities positively. Failure to show this to students distorts reality, the antithesis of what should happen in English classrooms.

If it is relevant to students' understanding of literature to know the historical period of a work and if it is significant to point out the religious, philosophical, and social points of an author, then it is also relevant to know the sexual orientation of the writer. And here is perhaps the crucial point in the resistance to acknowledging the sexual orientation of lesbian/gay writers: some people hold a curious belief that once the gay or lesbian identity is known there is nothing more to say about that writer. It is as if that one term

were so powerful, so complete that nothing else need be said. This, too, is completely dishonest. (The paucity of this belief is well demonstrated if one simply substitutes the word "protestant" for "gay." Can either term be used to express more than a partial point of view?) There is as much social diversity among lesbians/gay males as there is in the larger culture, and to identify a writer as gay/lesbian adds only another item of information to set in the total complex of personality. What many of us who are gay academics wish to see is not a focus on the lesbian/gay sexuality of literary figures; we wish only to see *that* information included with other information about authors given to students.

The issue for the classroom teacher becomes one of balance. A taboo about the lesbian/gay identity of an author is as imbalanced as a neurotic focus on that single issue. Neither is honest. Neither is healthy. Neither is finally moral.

Surrendering to deception so we will not be thought different from others negates the pursuit of truth embedded in teaching literature. The writers who have produced the literature we teach deserve to have the truth shared about their lives. We have no other moral option but to side with the truth openly.

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Con

Rayna Larson

Some past arguments in this Bait/Rebait feature break down along conservative vs. liberal lines, but I think our disagreement is more one of practicality vs. theoretical idealism. Although both of us may wish the world were different, we know that homosexuality is disapproved of by the majority of taxpayers who support the schools. Given the tenor of the times, it may be waving a red flag at potential censors to advertise that a particular writer is (or was) homosexual.

A recent letter in Ann Landers column came from a parent asking why the writings of a homosexual author were being taught in his child's school. Landers answered that what was at issue was not the sexual preference of the author, but the quality of the author's work. If educators change the emphasis and focus attention on sexual preference, then this may very well open such a floodgate of protests that the work of homosexual writers will be excluded entirely from the curriculum. This would mean that most young people would never become acquainted with homosexual authors whose works they may grow to love and whose lives and backgrounds they may eventually want to study. When we meet people in real life, we don't expect the first thing we learn to be their sexual preferences. The same should hold true when meeting authors.

Linguists talk about the concept of private and public information and private and public language. An author's published writing falls under the category of public, while that same author's sexual preferences and practices fall under the category of private. The two areas may overlap, but it isn't up to us as educators to push these areas together. Nor is it up to us to add to the

public bombardment about sex that today's kids get from the mass media and each other. Probably at no time in their lives are people less secure about sexual matters than during the teen years. One might wonder, then, if this is really the time to expect kids to sort out feelings that even adults have a hard time with.

Driving to work the other morning, I heard a distraught young woman on the radio recount how, during a recent crisis in her life, she had tried both skiing and lesbianism, and neither one had helped. Although I'm a school psychologist and not an English teacher, I can recognize non-parallelism. Her statement shocked me into wondering if—in our attempts to increase tolerance and understanding—we have placed homosexuality before kids as just another self-help option, sort of like EST, biofeedback, or TM.

Please do not think I am advocating cover-ups of authors' sexual preferences or encouraging teachers to lie to students who become interested enough to inquire about an author's life and background. What I am advocating is restraint and common sense. News articles have recently appeared about well-founded conjectures that Abraham Lincoln suffered from a venereal disease, but we would not expect social studies teachers to begin the study of the Gettysburg address with this information. Likewise, I expect English teachers to take first things first, and it's authors' works—not their sexuality—that should come first in literature classes.

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